

Shakespeare's Language

Students often complain about the difficulty in understanding Shakespeare's language. Some of the common problems are listed in this web page to help you understand his 16th century grammar and usage. (See the list of [abbreviations](#) at the end of this page.) Click here to go to [words common to Shakespeare](#), or [Wordplay](#).

Archaic Usage

- Second person pronouns:

<i>thou</i>	informal, like the French <i>tu</i>	used between friends or when addressing children or servants
<i>thy, thine</i>	possessive case	like <i>my</i> and <i>mine</i>
<i>you</i>	formal, like the French <i>vous</i>	used between strangers or when addressing someone of higher social rank
<i>ye</i>	plural	like "you-all"

- Verb inflection:

second person <i>thou</i>	add - <i>t</i> , - <i>st</i> , or - <i>est</i>	<i>thou art</i> , <i>thou seemest</i> ; may be contracted: <i>thou seem'st</i>
third person <i>he, she, it</i>	add - <i>eth</i>	<i>he knoweth</i> (not consistently used)

- Words common to Shakespeare, but not to us

	Meaning	Example
<i>a</i>	may be substituted for <i>he</i>	
<i>an, and</i>	may mean <i>if</i>	"And I may hide my face, let me play Thisby too. . ." *AMND 1.2.43
<i>anon</i>	<i>soon</i>	
<i>besREW</i>	<i>curse</i>	"Now much beshrew my manners and my pride, / If Hermia meant to say Lysander lied." AMND 2.2.54-5
<i>bootless</i>	<i>without result</i>	"And bootless make the

		breathless housewife churn" AMND 2.1.37
<i>cousin</i>	any relative or close friend; monarchs often refer to each other as cousin, whether related or not and whether friends or not	
<i>cuckold</i>	a man whose wife is unfaithful; the butt of many Elizabethan jokes, often referred to as wearing horns, the traditional sign of the cuckold. References to the cuckoo, a bird that lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, also point to the cuckold.	"The plain song cuckoo gray: / Whose note full many a man doth mark, / And dares not answer, nay." AMND 3.1.16-18
<i>fain</i>	<i>gladly</i>	
<i>forsooth</i>	<i>truly</i> , used for emphasis	
<i>forswear</i>	<i>renounce</i> or <i>perjure</i>	"As waggish boys in game themselves forswear / So the boy Love is perjured everywhere." AMND 1.1.240- 1
<i>hap</i>	<i>perhaps</i> , sometimes written as <i>haply</i>	
<i>hence</i>	away from here; also <i>later</i>	
<i>hither</i>	<i>here</i>	
<i>marry</i>	a mild oath using a corrupted spelling of "Mary"; <i>indeed</i>	"Marry, our play is 'The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby" AMND 1.2.9
<i>mistress</i>	any woman, often the female head of the household, or the object of a man's affection; seldom used in the modern sense of a woman engaged in an affair	
<i>sirrah</i>	used to address a male of low birth; sometimes used as an insult	
<i>tarry</i>	<i>wait</i>	
<i>thence</i>	away from there	
<i>troth</i>	<i>faith</i> or <i>truth</i> , as in "by my troth"	
<i>wench</i>	a girl or young woman, often a servant	
<i>wherefore</i>	<i>why</i>	
<i>whither</i>	<i>where to</i>	

*AMND *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

- Syntax

Normal sentence order is often inverted to make rhythms work out correctly or to emphasize the verb or object. Unscramble the syntax by rephrasing the clause or sentence in the normal S-V-O order.

Wordplay

Much of Shakespeare's humor is found in his delight in wordplay of various sorts. Because comic interludes gave brief relief from the rising dramatic tension in tragedies, you will find humor there as well as in the comedies.

Types

Puns	play on words that sound alike or that have multiple meanings	"One turf shall serve as pillow for us both, / One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth." <i>AMND</i> 2.2.42 (truth/true love/bethrothal)
Double entendres	double meanings, one of which is usually sexual	
Malapropisms	using the wrong word; generally reveals ignorance or lack of education, as in the lower classes; Bottom frequently employs the wrong word to humorous effect.	
Scatological, anatomical, or "dirty" jokes	about bodily functions (farts), about body parts, especially reproductive anatomy, or about sex; mild by today's standards!	

Verse vs. prose

Shakespeare uses both verse and prose in the plays. Pay close attention to shifts; these often signal a change.

Blank verse

Most of the plays are written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), which approximates normal speech in its rhythm. Watch for deviations from blank verse; Shakespeare uses them to draw attention to a change in a speaker's mindset, to move from serious to lighter subject matter (or vice versa—no pun intended!), to emphasize the differences between social classes, etc.

Couplets

Two rhymed lines at the end of a speech signal that a character is leaving the stage or that the scene is ending. Since the plays were not originally divided into acts and scenes, this was a cue for the actors. A series of couplets may be used to indicate a less serious exchange. For example, the Duke and Brabantio exchange platitudes in *Othello* after Brabantio fails to get Othello charged with witchcraft for marrying Desdemona. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the young lovers speak in blank verse when speaking to their superiors but in couplets when they talk to each other about love.

Other verse forms

Supernatural beings, like the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, speak in rhyming verse. Puck speaks in trochaic tetrameter, lines of four feet with the stress on the first syllable of each foot.

Sonnets may appear from time to time, as in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Prose

When a character suddenly lapses into prose speech, pay close attention to his or her state of mind! Prose may signal insanity, as in *Othello* when the main character is driven to madness by his jealousy. The Duke also speaks in prose to signal a change from personal business to state affairs. Iago speaks in prose when he is alone plotting against Othello or when he is duping Roderigo.

Abbreviations for plays cited above:

AMND *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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